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Managing Illinois Libraries:
Providing Services Customers Value
Executive Summary

ILLINOIS DOCUMENTS
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ILLINOIS STATE LIBRARY

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Abstract:

Public libraries are an important asset in virtually any size community, but especially in small towns where many social institutions are in decline or have left. Libraries increase the quality of life, can help attract new residents, and can support the quality of life that is essential to attracting businesses.

The results from the surveys of library users, administrators, rural public, and mayors confirm the fact that public library services are held in high esteem by users and rural residents alike. The growth in Internet use, computer training, and similar services are well-received by residents. The shifts in library services reported by library administrators closely mirror the preferences reported by users.

Increased services are pressuring library budgets and it is clear from the responses that libraries will need additional funds to provide more services in the future. Library administrators reported that they expect increases in bequests and other financial support and feel that public support, overall, will continue to grow.

Copies of the complete report are available online at: www.IIRA.org/pubs/

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Executive Summary

The transformation of the economy from an industrial base to an information or knowledge-based society has brought many changes for businesses and residents in rural areas. Greater opportunities to access new sources of information, even from remote rural areas, clearly exist. Businesses have moved to take advantage of this access to lower their costs of doing business. Rural residents can purchase goods and services using the Internet or other forms of e-commerce to reduce the travel costs associated with living in remote areas.

The advent of computers and the Internet has opened new opportunities for rural public libraries. Now libraries can provide access to information sources that formerly were virtually unavailable in small towns. Many information sources are available in rural libraries because of electronic access and library partnerships. Illinois libraries cooperate to share resources using tools created and maintained by regional library systems. Some of these tools are the Union List of Periodicals, listings of magazines and journal holdings, LLSAPs (Local Library System Automation Programs), and listings of print collection offerings in member libraries.

These tools have been conceptualized and developed by the Illinois regional library systems that were created to encourage Illinois library cooperation for the past 32 years. The information location and retrieval tools created by the 12 regional library systems are now mounted on the Internet. Recent innovations have made Illinois one of the first states to offer statewide resource sharing. This resource sharing is supported by both the Virtual Illinois Catalog (VIC), the web-based online catalog of statewide library holdings, and by a delivery system of vans that cross Illinois daily to deliver library requests. FirstSearch, an electronic resource containing full-text journal articles and indexes, is delivered via the Internet to rural libraries because of a licensing agreement negotiated for all libraries in Illinois by the Illinois State Library. Using FirstSearch, libraries in rural Illinois can access WorldCat, a source containing the merged catalogs of libraries around the world.

Libraries can work with business owners to help them stay current with the latest technology by providing Internet access and instruction to library customers on the appropriate use of the Internet. Librarians are now in a position to help users evaluate Internet sites to determine their validity and/or appropriateness for various user groups.

Libraries also can help residents, especially students, access new information sources and help them bridge the disparity between educational programs in metro and rural areas. Increasingly, librarians are being encouraged to approach customer service in many of the same ways that businesses might respond in the private sector.

This report examines practices and policies of rural public libraries in nearly 30 counties in central Illinois in 1999. Most of these libraries (72.7 percent) serve a population of less than 5,000 residents. Only 5.2 percent serve a population of more than 25,000. Most of the libraries (62.8 percent) are financed by special districts, as is typical of libraries in Illinois. Thus, the information contained in this report will be of most benefit to small public libraries and policymakers in rural areas.

The analyses are intended to help library administrators understand the attitudes of users, the general public, and local public officials in regards to current library services and services that should be provided in the future. Responses from mail surveys of library users, library administrations, the Illinois Rural Life Panel, and mayors in central Illinois are systematically analyzed so that library administrators can assess how well current services are being perceived and the areas that might be improved to meet customers' needs.

Library Users

A sample of 2,776 library users in 79 libraries within the Alliance Library System (ALS) was surveyed. The library users were asked about the quality of current services, additional services they would like, and whether they would pay more to have additional services provided. User responses are analyzed by age and income to better understand the responses.

Library users were asked to indicate the importance of 34 services regularly provided by many libraries. The services were grouped into those designed to help users improve their job or income status and specific services that libraries generally provide to all users. To make the information manageable, the services were grouped into nine broad categories and users were asked to rate the importance of each using a five-point Likert Scale ranging from "not important" to "very important."

Overall, customers ranked competent and friendly service as most important. In other words, they value librarians who are knowledgeable and willing to help them with requests. They also value interlibrary loan access, access to the Internet, children and youth services, and hobby and leisure services, as well as basic reference services. Different responses are found by age and income level but, by and large, the differences can be explained by the direct value of the specific services to the population cohort and/or their familiarity with the services provided.

Services that did not have a direct impact on users were rated lower. For instance, the category of economic development and business services was ranked lowest, followed by employment and workforce development programs. These programs do not directly affect a large number of users and many may not have been familiar with their benefits.

A more detailed examination of the user responses shows that obtaining interlibrary loans, improving family members' grades in school, gaining access to the Internet, and reading out-of-town newspapers and magazines are considered very important by library users in this study.

Library users overwhelming (99.0 percent) see the public library as adding to the quality of life in the community. Also, 64.0 percent reported that libraries help attract businesses, and 80.4 percent reported that libraries help attract or retain residents. Furthermore, 96.2 percent see a positive connection between library services and improving a family member's grades in school. Clearly, library users are pleased with library services in Illinois.

Users (71.2 percent) also are willing to pay more to have library services enhanced and 82.3 percent are willing to pay between $1.01 and $3.00 per month for the increases in service. This willingness to pay more does not seem to be related to the income level of respondents.

When asked to place a dollar value on the services received by their family from the library during the past 12 months, users reported an average of $853 or more than $70 per month. This value, of course, is based on people currently using the library and may not be relevant for others in the community.

The importance that respondents assigned to each of the nine service categories was examined in terms of the willingness to pay. Substantial differences were reported in preferences for services and willingness to pay.

Customers were grouped into those expressing a high level of satisfaction with library services and those expressing low satisfaction. A definite relationship exists between residents expressing high satisfaction and the provision of Internet and computer services. The size of library collection is also important in determining satisfaction levels, with users of small libraries more likely to report less satisfaction.

Library Administrators

The study paid special attention to library services for which demand is increasing and those for which the demand has declined in the past two years. Library administrators reported that the two services with the greatest increases in demand have been helping users learn the Internet (71.1 percent) and helping them use computers (64.5 percent).

Librarians reported several services that had experienced decreased demand in the past two years. Decreases most often reported are literacy training (35.5 percent), business reference services (33.9 percent), and staff presentations to public interest groups (29.0 percent). In some instances, these declines probably resulted from changes in public need. The results may also suggest that libraries' limited human and fiscal resources have been reallocated to higher demand service areas.

Library administrators also noted a decline in private fundraising efforts; however, in recent years, grant opportunities have been available from state government sources which may have lessened the need for librarians to contact other agencies for fiscal resources. Some libraries in the study area have received major bequests for specific projects. This may have lessened the time spent seeking private funding.

Many libraries have experienced financial difficulties reallocating sufficient resources (human and physical) to meet the added demands caused by the explosion in technology. Fortunately, the Secretary of State/State Librarian of Illinois provided computers to every library. In some instances, access to the Internet has been provided by local telecommunication providers or subsidized by e-rate funding. Without regional library systems and the State Library negotiating and purchasing licenses for shared databases offered over the Internet, local library resources would be further drained.

Library administrators reported that, if additional funds were available, helping users with the Internet was the highest priority (56.8 percent). Next in importance was to broaden the program offerings in the library (39.2 percent), followed by marketing library services to the public (23.0 percent), and promoting the importance of reading and reading skills (21.0 percent).

While the specific rankings vary somewhat, there is general agreement between the library administrators' views about what should be expanded and the services that users perceive as important. Overall, community service initiatives and business outreach activities were ranked less important by both librarians and users. This ranking may reflect the fact that the current users are not directly affected by these services and thus, are not aware of their value.

Perceptions of Mayors

Public libraries serve a diverse clientele, including public agencies within the community. Since they receive a majority of their funding from either the city government or a special district, it is important to understand how local public officials perceive the services provided by libraries. A survey of Illinois mayors conducted by the IIRA in the fall of 1998 and the winter of 1999 included several questions about mayors' attitudes regarding participation by libraries in local economic development activities. These findings were compared with a national survey of local public officials conducted in 1995 by the Illinois State Library, Library Research Center (LRC) at the University of Illinois. Cities located within the ALS were examined in this report.

In the LRC's statewide survey, local librarians (69 percent) felt that they were responding better than most other local agencies to the needs of residents. In the same survey, however, local public officials (chief executives and budget officers) were less complimentary with only 32 percent reporting that libraries were responding to the needs of residents better than most other local agencies.

Based on the definition of an "ideal library" as a measure of expectation, however, local public officials were much more positive in the LRC study. Eighty-two percent ranked the contributions by libraries to individual or community well-being as high or very high. Sixty percent of library respondents rated their own knowledge of community needs as high or very high, but only 40 percent of local public officials responded in that way.

There are many opportunities for local public libraries to assist with local community and economic development efforts. Library users rated the importance of these efforts relatively low among other activities in which libraries engage, and librarians indicated that not much staff time was devoted to these efforts. Only about one in five mayors responding to the IIRA statewide survey reported active involvement by librarians in local economic development efforts. Part of the explanation, according to the mayors, is that assistance from

the library is not needed. Also, some librarians are not trained in local economic development practices and may not be very interested in adding these activities to an already overloaded schedule.

There is some indication that mayors are not always familiar with the holdings and/or services available in libraries, but mayors in the ALS (43.8 percent) reported that they intend to include libraries more in future economic development efforts. The point may be that, for librarians interested in being involved in development efforts, better communication with public officials may be necessary so that mayors realize the types of library services available.

Looking to the Future

Public libraries, even in small communities, will face many challenges because of technological change. Rapid increases in computer and Internet usage have placed additional demands on library personnel to train the public and to give personal assistance to users. Library users and administrators were asked to indicate changes that they expect in the future and ways in which they may have to adjust.

Library users reported a desire for more programming for both youth and adults and increases in the collection. In smaller libraries, the need to increase the collection may be at least partly offset by greater use of interlibrary loan services and electronic databases currently licensed by the Illinois State Library. Expanded computer access and classes are also important but were reported by fewer than 10 percent of the users responding. It may be that the need for service expansion in these areas is limited to specific locations, especially among relatively small libraries with limited budgets.

Library administrators were asked about options for enhancing services and most of these involved building on recent technological advances such as the Internet and on maintaining interlibrary loan partnerships with other libraries. Respondents listed the following as possible service enhancement responses: (1) increase public awareness that interlibrary loan access is available via the Internet; (2) libraries provide enhanced Internet access and increase the availability of training for customers on computer usage; (3) increase awareness of home pages, on-line catalogs, and web sites; and (4) library staff must be prepared as trainers through professional continuing education courses to offer more public education on the use of new computer applications in the library.

Library administrators also realize that libraries must gain public support if they are to receive adequate funding. When asked how they might accomplish this, library administrators suggested several approaches. Libraries can build partnerships with other libraries, library systems, and agencies, such as schools, to accomplish their mission. They must also meet the customer demands for enhanced library programming. Library administrators expressed a recognition of the need to listen to customers in order to improve customer service and to offer more customized library services.

Increased staffing at libraries was suggested as one of the best ways to improve customer service. Strategic long-range planning (i.e., ALA's Planning for Results) and other community needs assessment methodologies can assist planners to make library services more relevant to the current needs of a community.

Libraries will also need to aggressively pursue new revenue streams to purchase new and upgraded technology. Many of these strategies for improving library service in the future will require time and effort that may not be readily available at the local library level, especially in small rural libraries. They may have to rely on assistance from regional library systems or other agencies.

Public Library Services in the Future

Librarians were asked for their vision regarding changes that will occur in the next decade to impact public service. While differences were reported by size of library and region, several trends are common among many respondents.

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- More usage of public libraries was predicted.
- An increase in library funding from bequests and donations was foreseen.
- More public involvement in planning and increased taxpayer support of libraries was anticipated.
- An increase in interlibrary loan activity was envisioned.
- More partnerships with local, regional, and statewide agencies were predicted.

Overall, library administrators seem positive about the future for public libraries, although they certainly recognize the challenges that must be faced. Specifically, library administrators were asked to identify obstacles that will impact their ability to achieve their vision. Two obstacles emerged as most significant.

One of the greatest obstacles perceived by librarians is competition for the public's time. Greater work or family demands may have an impact on the public's time to pursue recreational reading or to seek information.

The other major obstacle is limited financial resources. In fact, during the 5 past three years (FY94-95 compared with FY96-97) local public libraries within ALS have seen a 3.0 percent increases in operating expenses in inflation adjusted dollars. This is not an annual figure; rather, it is a total for the three years. In general, a local public library's revenue is composed of 85 percent local property taxes and 7 percent state sources (i.e., special grants).

When library administrators were asked to realistically assess and balance their vision for the future with the perceived obstacles, they predicted several actual changes within the next ten years. Administrators of both large and small libraries agreed that the skill level of library staff would increase and so would the level of customer service provided by library staff. They also agreed that more computers and Internet services would be provided in the future. Administrators of larger public libraries identified twice as many changes that they believed would actually become reality, setting an ambitious and optimistic agenda for the future of their libraries.

In addition, library administrators identified two areas where public demands currently outpace the library's fiscal and staffing resources. Helping customers use the Internet (71.9 percent) and assisting customers to learn to use computers (67.2 percent) were named with greater frequency than any other services.

If additional funds became available for libraries, public library administrators indicated they would budget for these improvements:

- Offering more youth services programming and more programs for adults
- Library construction or building renovation and remodeling projects
- Technology upgrades to support Internet and computer-related improvements
- Increased library staff to offer improved customer service

At the beginning of the new century, libraries face challenges and opportunities that will leave no library untouched. Public libraries will become either much more than they are now—or much less. Based on analysis of customer preferences and emerging technology trends, librarians must be proactive in determining the destiny of their libraries. Libraries must maintain a balance between those services that can best be delivered using new technologies with limited staff intervention and those services that require increased staff time with human interaction.

This report summarizes several Illinois initiatives on the horizon in 2000 that can bring new vitality to libraries if library administrators and staff are prepared to embrace the innovative opportunities. To make Illinois libraries demand-driven institutions, library administrators and boards must listen to customers and design an appropriate mix of library services to address the needs of customers of all ages from a variety of economic and educational levels as lifelong learners.